

# Johnnies-come-lately to Dealy Plaza

Albert H. Newman, *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: The Reasons Why*, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., New York, 1970, 622 pages, \$10.

Judy Whitson Bonner, *Investigation of a Homicide: The Murder of JFK*, Drake House/Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1969, 367 pages, \$6.95.

Brian McConnell, *The History of Assassination*, Aurora Publishers, Nashville and London, 1970, 360 pages, \$6.95.

Sylvia Meagher

New York

Some 70 pages into Judy Bonner's book one reads that "Tippit . . . spotted a man walking swiftly toward him" and that after a brief exchange "the man pumped three bullets into the officer's body." She is wrong on every point. The correct story is that the pedestrian was walking at a normal pace in the same direction as the police car. Tippit pulled up alongside him and stopped him, for unknown reasons, having seen him only from the rear up to that moment. They talked for a minute and then Tippit came out of the car and drew his revolver, whereupon the pedestrian shot him four times and the officer fell dead.

Those are the undisputed facts accepted by Warren Report defenders and critics alike. They have not been challenged by anyone, nor is Mrs. Bonner challenging them. She merely misstates the details embodied in the Warren Report and the 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits (which she has had five years to study) out of plain and inexcusable inaccuracy.

Her book, *Investigation of a Homicide*, is not a work of scholarship or objective inquiry — it is an unvarnished apologia for the Dallas Police Department. Not content with trying to exonerate the police of the serious charges and suspicion surrounding their performance after the assassination and the scandalous manner in which they exercised custody of Oswald, Mrs. Bonner seeks to endow the cops with preposterous purity and heroism. Her study is careless of the elementary facts, fails to deal with the major criticisms of the official findings, does not even have an index, and is written in a naive and banal style which adds insult to injury. Even the supposedly authoritative police radio transcript which

Mrs. Meagher is author of the Subject Index to the Warren Report and the Hearings and the Exhibits and Accessories After the Fact. A New Yorker, she is one of

## A Review

appears in an appendix to the book does not dignify it by providing a useful research tool — it covers only a narrow time-span, does not identify the callers by name, and mixes paraphrasing with verbatim quotations. This transcript is therefore less informative than any of the three earlier versions published by the Commission.

Mrs. Bonner's transparent effort to improve the image of the Dallas Police will not enhance their reputation or her own. Her book might best have come never than now.

BRIAN MCCONNELL is described by his publishers as a senior journalist with the *London Daily Mirror*. His book, *The History of Assassination*, contains a section on the JFK assassination which is even more disgraceful than the Bonner book. Although he is dealing with a chapter of very recent history and with facts that are virtually household words, McConnell sets down a series of indecent errors. He says, not once but twice, that Oswald's birthplace was New York, when he was born in New Orleans; he identifies Marguerite as Oswald's wife, instead of his mother; he describes John F. Kennedy as the oldest son, when he was the second of four sons; and, on the assassination of Robert Kennedy, he writes that Sirhan "escaped" but was soon captured, when in reality he was seized on the spot, revolver still in hand. A "historian" who gratuitously mutilates the simplest, most familiar data in this way is beneath contempt. Need I add that McConnell, naturally and predictably, also swallows whole-hog the contaminated Warren Report?

ALBERT H. NEWMAN'S book, *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, is an entirely different kettle of fish. Although Newman, too, accepts the central findings of the Warren Report, he has done his homework on the 26 volumes and has done some investigation of his own in Dallas and elsewhere. So far as I know, he is the only author of a treatise defending the Warren Report who has carefully studied and assimilated the published documents and testimony. Regrettably, his source material does not include the unpublished documents in the National

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Archives, which were already being utilized in books published as early as 1967. That is something of a handicap to Newman. For example, he is intrigued to find in the Exhibits mention of a notice of attempt to deliver a parcel to Oswald at the Paine home in Irving two days before the assassination. What would the contents of that parcel have revealed about Oswald's activities and associates? Why was there no investigation into this matter? Had Newman's research encompassed the material in the Archives, he would have learned that the matter was followed up. The parcel, on which 12c was due, was delivered in a second attempt on November 21 or 22, 1963; it contained a newspaper or magazine (Commission Document No. 735, pages 256-257).

That information may only serve to disappoint Newman, because it does not advance his imaginative and sometimes ingenious hypothesis. His theme is that a motive for all of Oswald's alleged acts can be confidently deduced, although the Warren Commission blunderingly failed to

was politically motivated and that it was fanatical belief in the Cuban Revolution and zealous admiration of Castro that inspired all his actions. Because President Kennedy was an enemy of and a threat to the Castro regime, Oswald decided to remove him — never mind that, as Oswald himself pointed out under interrogation, Lyndon Johnson would be an equal or greater danger to Cuba. As for General Walker, his constant agitation for the overthrow of Castro by force provoked Oswald to cold-blooded determination to eliminate him.

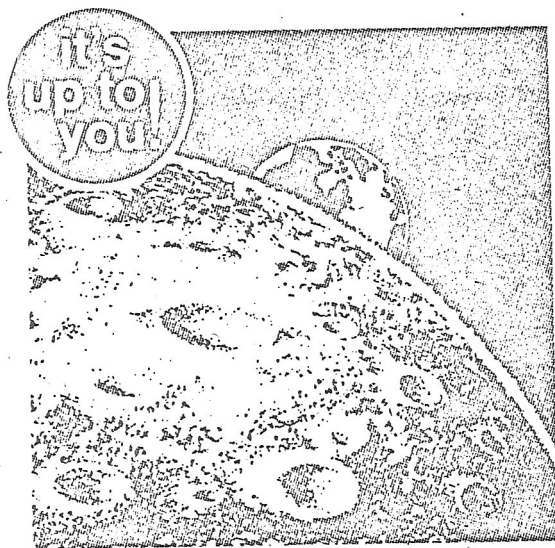
It is at that point that Newman parts company with the Warren Commission. While he agrees that Oswald alone and unaided shot JFK and then Tippit, he argues that Oswald with one or more accomplices made the attempt on Walker's life on April 10, 1963. In Newman's best of all possible worlds, we have both a lone assassin and a conspiracy!

But Newman's hypothesis rests on the fallacious premise that JFK was killed by a lone assassin. At this point in time it should no longer be necessary to belabor

"single bullet" or the "lone assassin" theories. The fact that Newman constructs a case that superficially seems coherent, sophisticated, and "inventive" cannot overcome the fatal deficiency of his basic assumptions. Moreover, Newman himself has been such an obsessive Castro-watcher since 1959 that he creates the clear impression that he has projected onto Oswald a single-mindedness which mirrors Newman far more than the alleged assassin.

NEWMAN'S FIXED idea leads him to unfair presentation of the evidence at times and occasionally to wholly insupportable, indefensible, and irrational inferences. An example of his unfairness arises when he contends that Oswald methodically tried to conceal his presence in Dallas in order to avoid his being implicated in any attack on General Walker, and that he registered under the false name "O. H. Lee" at the Beckley Street rooming house for that reason. Not until several hundred pages later does Newman acknowledge that a week earlier Oswald freely had given his real name at Mary Bledsoe's rooming house, only to be abruptly evicted without explanation at week's end. Mrs. Bledsoe objected to Oswald's phone conversations in a foreign language and to his frequent use of her refrigerator, but Oswald did not know that. He may have feared that his political notoriety had made him unwelcome and decided that a pseudonym would reduce the risk of a second eviction at the Beckley Street establishment. That, in fact, is more or less what he told his wife. Newman, however, suggests that Oswald gave his real name to Mrs. Bledsoe because he intended to stay at her rooming house only a short time — which is still inconsistent with his thesis as well as with the factual record.

Progressing from the unfair to the insupportable, Newman engages in the dubious self-indulgence of investing cabalistic or cryptographic meaning into letters of the alphabet and arithmetical numbers so as to prove Oswald's alleged preoccupation with Fidel Castro and the 26th-of-July Movement. Newman cites the recurrence of the digits 2 and 6 in Oswald's addresses (602, Elsbeth, 1026 North Beckley) as highly significant, although the two digits together do not appear in many other of Oswald's addresses (4905 Magazine, 1501 West 7th, 2703 Mercedes). He also argues that "D. F. Dricital" (a fictitious name on the mail order form for the revolver) is an anagram drawing letters from "Castro" and "Fidel". The pseudonym, however, is not "Dricital" but *Drittal*; as may be seen from the published records (WR 173-174; CE 790). Nor has Newman mis-read the name, as one might first assume. He knows that Oswald misspelled it and that he had really intended to write "Dricital"! Personally, I do not accept Newman's credentials as a



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mind-reader, much less as a reader of posthumous minds.

Ordinarily his book might be dismissed as an irrelevant if sometimes intellectually adroit feat, since it is predicated on a set of discredited conclusions of the Warren Commission. Ironically, however, the book has a certain amount of positive value which the author may not have intended. Newman does point out the slipshod and inadequate questioning of witnesses by Commission lawyers in particular instances, and their failure to resolve serious conflicts in the testimony. He does argue convincingly that the Commission's reconstruction of the Walker shooting is simply untenable and divorced from the actual evidence. Newman's position is that Oswald could not have made the abortive attempt on Walker unaided, and that he had three accomplices in the Walker shooting. In arguing his case, Newman inadvertently augments and strengthens the earlier arguments of critics of the Warren Report who believe on the basis of the known evidence that Oswald was not implicated in the Walker shooting at all.

IN POSTULATING an attack on Walker by Oswald and three unnamed accomplices, Newman has some material basis for his inferences. But when he then proceeds to a collateral hypothesis that Oswald was intercepted by Tippit while en route to Walker's house with the intention of making a second attempt to shoot the General, Newman has not the slightest evidentiary foundation. He is merely engaged in the wildest kind of speculation and invention, and indulging his tenacious bias against Oswald, much as he did with the Driftal/"Drictal" episode. Admitting that he has Oswald walking to the south when supposedly his destination was the Walker residence, to the north, Newman contrives an "explanation" — Oswald was headed for a lonely bus depot where few people would observe him, intending to board a bus whose route led to Walker's vicinity. But Walker was out of town on the day of the assassination. Whereas Newman credits Oswald with the cunning

of ascertaining in advance in March, 1963, that Walker was away from Dallas (so that Oswald and his confederates could safely "case" and photograph the Walker house and environs), and with ascertaining that Walker had returned to his home on April 10 (when an unknown rifleman tried to shoot him), he suggests that on the day of the assassination Oswald did not know Walker's whereabouts but set out to shoot him if he happened to be at home. In other words, Newman — just like the Warren Commission — makes any assumptions necessary to incriminate Oswald, without regard for a consistent standard or for factual justification of quite serious accusations.

When he comes to the familiar Dealey Plaza evidence (the shots, wounds, rifle, paper bag, cartons, ballistics, and the like), Newman more or less follows in the footsteps of the Warren Commission and arrives triumphantly at the same anticlimatic "lone assassin" verdict against the murdered Oswald. He largely ignores the major challenges posed by the critics of the contradictory, misrepresented, and inimical evidence as published in the Warren Commission's reports and records, or he fails to overcome those of the critics' arguments which he does deal with.

Newman discusses the notorious photographs of Oswald holding a rifle as well as both *The Worker* and *The Militant* (which periodicals are antithetical to each other to an extreme) as if they were indisputably authentic. Seemingly he is unaware that results of published research strongly suggest fabrication, and indifferent to the profusion of discrepancies and omissions in the evidence surrounding these incriminating photographs, in the 26 volumes which he has studied so closely but without appreciating all the crucial aspects. For example, Newman seems to have overlooked the fact that the pivotal photographs are not mentioned on a certified list of property recovered by the Dallas Police, dated November 26, 1963, where the omission is incomprehensible if the photos are in fact authentic. The absence of the photos on that list was not

overlooked by the Warren Commission lawyers, however, and the glaring discrepancy was glossed over months later by eliciting from one of the search officers testimony that the sensational photographs were included in the inventory, under "miscellaneous photographs"!

Since Newman's book is the only one among those which embrace the major findings of the Warren Report that shows any semblance of scholarship and organized intellectual effort, it is all the more unfortunate that Newman lapses frequently into paranoid excesses and that he makes his inherently keen intelligence a hostage to an overpowering *idee fixe*. The book is immensely superior to the shoddy and pretentious efforts of McConnell and Bonner, that is true; but if the three books are graded in terms of the intrinsic capacity and talent of their respective authors, it is the Newman book that is the greatest disappointment. Thus, I can understand even if I do not share the feelings of a fellow-critic who said in a recent letter, referring to Newman's book, "I wish he was on our side." □

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